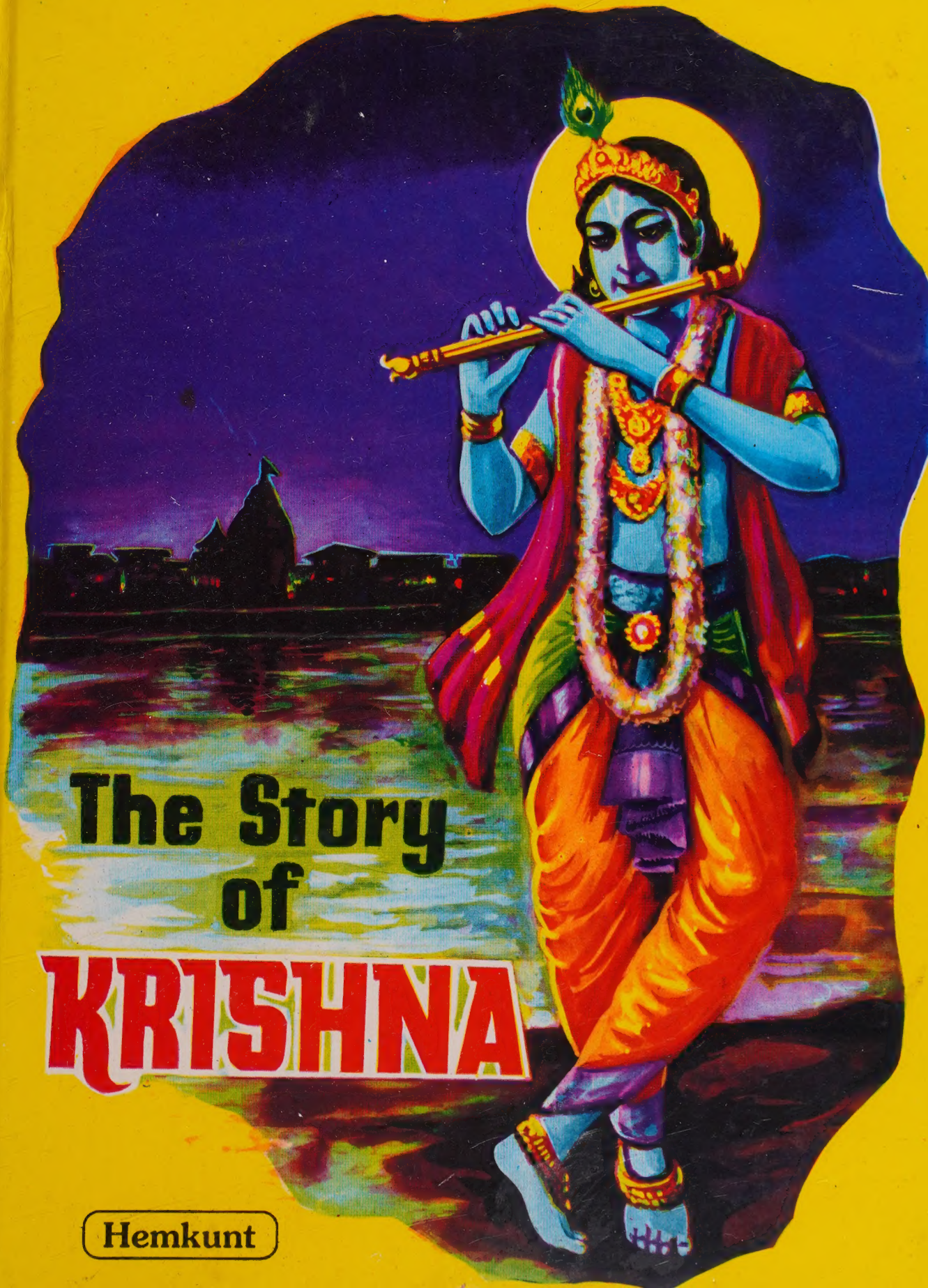
The Story of
KRISHNA
Hemkunt

Basu

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THE STORY OF KRISHNA

Retold by

Bani Roy Chowdhury

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The Birth of Krishna

Many, many years ago a very wicked king, named Kans, ruled over the city of Mathura. He had usurped the throne of his father and put him in prison. His kingdom was large, but he was ever trying to grab the lands of his neighbours. He carried fire and sword wherever he went. He burnt villages and towns and killed innocent people. He was a terror even to his own subjects whom he punished heavily for petty lapses.

Devaki, his only sister, was the very opposite of her brother. She was gentle, good and pious and was perhaps the only person for whom Kans had a soft corner in his heart. She was now a young woman and Kans decided to marry her to a handsome young man named Vasudev, who was the son of one of his nobles. The marriage was an occasion for great rejoicings. Kans was so happy that he offered to drive the bride and the bridegroom in his own chariot to their home.

Devaki and Vasudev mounted the decorated bridal chariot. Kans took the reins in his hands. He cracked the whip and the horses started off at a gallop.

"You fool !" thundered a voice which seemed to come from nowhere. "You are happy today for being groom to this young couple, but their child will be the cause of your death."

Kans was horrified at these words of doom. He pulled up the horses, sprang from his seat and, catching Devaki by her long hair, dragged her out of the chariot. Cursing her angrily, he drew his sword and was about to make an end of her when Vasudev fell at his feet and said, "My dear brother-in-law, the voice you have heard may be that of an evil-spirit, which wants to ruin your house. Pray spare the life of your beloved sister, and in return you may kill her children as soon as they are born."

The idea appealed to Kans. He ordered his men to arrest Devaki and Vasudev and throw them into prison. So the newly-married couple began to live in a miserable dark cell. As soon as a child was born to Devaki, the guards informed the king, and the child was immediately put to death.

Years passed. Kans had killed seven of his sister's children. On a stormy night in August, the eighth child, a baby boy was born in the dark cell of the prison. The parents were happy at first, but soon the thought, that the cruel Kans would kill him in the morning made them sad.

As Devaki and Vasudev sat mournfully in the dark dismal cell with their eyes wet with tears they heard a low

voice, "Take the child, Vasudev," it said, "to the village of Gokul just across the river Yamuna. Your sister has just given birth to a baby girl. Exchange your child with her's and return before dawn. Nothing will bar your way."

There was not a moment to lose. Vasudev wrapped the baby in a piece of cloth and taking it up gently in his arms walked towards the door. To his great surprise he found the guards fast asleep, the door threw itself open, and Vasudev walked out of the prison-house unnoticed and unseen.

Outside a fearful storm was raging and the river was swollen. Vasudev hesitated to step into the water. He was sure that he would be swept away by the swift current. But lo ! a strange thing happened. The moment he stepped into the river, the level of the water fell. The roaring current began to flow gently, and Vasudev waded safely across the river through knee-deep water.

On reaching the opposite bank, he ran through the trees till he came to the hut of Nanda, who was the chief herdsman and Vasudev's brother-in-law. Vasudev found his sister Yashoda asleep, a new born baby was lying next to her. Quietly he put down his son and picked up the baby girl. The little girl smiled in her sleep and snuggled close to him. Vasudev tip-toed out of the hut and returned to the prison cell, unnoticed and unseen as the guards still slept.

Early the next morning one of the guards ran to

Kans and announced, "A girl has been born to princess Devaki."

Kans was surprised, 'A girl!' He had been sure that Devaki's eighth child would be a boy. 'A girl born to kill him!'

But Kans did not hesitate. The girl had to be killed. He picked up his sword and walked into Devaki's cell.

"Where is the girl ?" he roared.

Devaki burst into tears and fell at his feet. "Brother, spare the child. What harm can a girl do to you ?"

Kans pushed her away and picked up the baby, holding her by one leg, he lifted his sword to slash her when lo ! the

baby slipped from his grasp, and rose high above him. She seemed to grow in size and in a dreadful voice said, "Foolish man, you think you can defy God ! Devaki's son who will kill you is safe and sound."

The girl vanished. The news completely unnerved Kans. If the girl was not Devaki's child then where was the child born to her ? How did it get out ?

Kans questioned the guards one by one but their answers did not help him. He questioned Vasudev and Devaki but could get no answer out of them. Kans was really frightened now. He sat down chin in hand, his forehead wrinkled in thought. Suddenly he threw back his head and laughed. How foolish to tell him that Devaki's son was alive ! God did not know how clever he was.

He called his soldiers and ordered, "Kill all new born male babies in my kingdom. See that not one is left alive."

The soldiers sword in hand, went through the streets and lanes, of Kans's kingdom tearing away babies from their mothers' arms and cutting them in two. Screams of the shocked mothers filled the air.

Kans smiled in his palace. He was safe. At least that was what he thought. He did not know that Devaki's son was safe on the opposite bank of the Yamuna. As this did not come under Kans's kingdom, he was safe from the sword of Kans's soldiers.

The cowherds who lived there led a wandering life. They took their family and cattle wherever they found good grazing ground. They earned their living by selling milk, butter and curd. Nanda was their leader.

News spread quickly amongst the cowherds that a son had been born to Nanda. They came in groups to have a look at the child.

"What a lovely face he has !" was what they all said. A payful smile seemed to light up his little face. They named him Krishna.

Krishna grew into a sturdy little lad with sparkling eyes and a mischievous smile. Yashoda was an adoring mother. Her world seemed to revolve around him. She got golden bangles for him and hung a chain around his plump waist. She stuck a peacock feather in his hair which fluttered merrily in the breeze when he ran.

But he was a naughty little fellow and there was no end to his pranks. He loved butter and curd and these best of all when he could steal them from the houses of the other cowherds. When Yashoda gave these to him, he did not feel like eating them.

By the time he was five years old, he had become leader of his group, for no one was daring when it came to stealing the two things that he loved most of all—butter and curd.

One morning, this idea of stealing butter had suddenly come to him. He told his friends, "Meet me under the banyan tree tomorrow morning."

The next morning, he tip-toed towards the door. His bangles jangled once and he froze where he was. He turned

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slowly around. Yashoda was busy with her work and had not noticed him. All was clear. He ran excitedly to the banyan tree. Here he found his friends, all mischievous five-year olds as himself. They chattered loudly and excitedly when they saw him.

"What are you planning to do ?" they wanted to know.

"Now listen carefully to me and do exactly as I say," replied Krishna, raising a plump finger. All heads nodded readily.

"Follow me," he ordered urgently and walked, ahead of them. They came to a lane, where there were rows of huts on either side. Krishna with his finger on his lips began to peep into each house. In the first few houses he found the women at work and he beat a hasty retreat. He shook his head at his friends. There was no hope there. Then, as he peeped into another house, he gave a little squeal of joy. There was no one there. Probably the women had gone to the river to fill their pitchers.

"Hurry up and get in," he whispered urgently. His companions trooped in meekly and a little frightened. Their little hearts seemed to thud in their chests.

"Do you see that pot of butter hanging up there ?" Krishna asked pointing to the ceiling. "Bend down under it one on top of the other. Hurry or someone may come in."

The boys with amazing speed, crawled on top of one

another till they looked like a human ladder. Last of all, Krishna scrambled over them, stood on the top and tried to reach for the pot. He was ready to weep. The pot was out of his reach but he was determined to get it. His friends were depending on him for a feast of butter. He slowly stood up on tip-toe and his plump fingers had just got hold of the pot when suddenly he lost his balance. Down came Krishna, pot butter and all. The pot cracked as it hit the ground and the butter, so smooth and white, spilled out. The boys, their eyes alight, fell on their knees, licking up as much as they could and as fast as they could. Krishna had kept an eye down the lane as he licked and smacked his lips.

"Come on, boys, let's go now," he ordered when they all had had their fill. The boys obedient and contented, filed out. Their first outing had been a complete success and they hadn't got caught !

This went on for many months without Krishna getting into any trouble. The women folk complained and grumbled. They didn't know what to do. Whenever they left their homes unattended their butter or curd and sometimes both, was sure to be stolen. Who was the culprit ? Never before had such things happened in their group. When the boys were questioned, they firmly clamped shut their mouth and refused to name their leader. Moreover, they had such innocent faces that the men would say, "Leave these boys alone. How can such small boys steal

pots which you hang so high up ?"

Then one day someone spied Krishna leading his gang into one of the huts. After that, there was no peace for Yashoda.

"Yashoda, just see what your darling boy has done to my butter pot. Its broken ! Look at my little boy. He never does things of this sort."

The little boy in question and a member of Krishna's raiding party hid behind his mother, his face and ears red with embarrassment.

Another day a woman walked in shouting and flinging her arms in anger.

"Yashoda, someone has eaten up all my curd. Where is Krishna ?"

They found him hiding behind the door, his face smeared with the tell-tale curd. The woman pointed an accusing finger at him and screamed, "Look at your boy with my curd all over his face."

Krishna looked so embarrassed and funny that Yashoda burst into laughter. The woman was shocked.

"You are to blame," she shouted. "He steals and you laugh. That son of yours is going to grow up a thief."

But when these complaints started pouring in daily and grew in number, Yashoda lost her temper. She knew her boy was good. He was only mischievous but he had to change his habits.

One day, after three women in a row had come in to show their broken pots, Yashoda dragged Krishna to a tree that grew in the courtyard and tied him to it.

"You stay there for the rest of the day," she said, walking away. "That will teach you not to steal butter and curd from other people's houses."

Krishna watched her, his eyes mischievous as ever. He waited for a while, then he tugged and pulled with all the might in his little body. Nothing happened. Again he gave a mighty tug. Suddenly the tree came crashing down. The noise frightened Yashoda. She ran to the courtyard

wringing her hands in despair. The huge uprooted tree lay on the ground. Surely, her Krishna must have been crushed under that heavy trunk. Why had she lost her temper and tied him there !

Yashoda ran around the fallen tree, lifted a branch here and parted the leaves there, but Krishna was nowhere.

"Oh God, where is my Krishna ?" she wailed, "Krishna where are you ? Answer me. Krishna, answer me."

There was no reply nor was there any sign of Krishna. Everything was still. Yashoda burst into tears. Very slowly the leaves parted and a mischievous little face peeped out.

"Mother," called Krishna, climbing out. "I'm here all safe and sound."

Yashoda was at first afraid to believe what she saw. Then she picked up Krishna, embraced and kissed him all over his face.

"Oh Krishna, how happy I am. I would have died, if you had got crushed under that tree."

"Then don't tie me up again," Krishna said, sweetly.

"Alright but don't get into trouble," warned Yashoda. But the moment she put him down and returned to her work, off went Krishna to gather his friends to do what he liked best—lap up the butter and curd of the neighbours !

Brindavan

As we already know, Nanda and the cowherds wandered from place to place in search of new pastures. When Krishna was seven years old, they moved on to Brindavan, where the rich green fields stretched far and wide. Nanda and his men built themselves huts and settled down there.

Krishna now wanted to join the cowherds when, at the break of dawn, they took the cattle to graze.

"Mother, please let me go with them. After all, I am a big boy now. I promise to look after myself."

Yashoda smiled. Her Krishna a big boy ! But she could never refuse him anything, so she agreed. Krishna was excited.

"Mother can you give me a flute ?"

"A flute ? Why ?"

"One of the boys has it and he plays such soft notes on it."

"But who will teach you ?"

"Nobody. I will teach myself," replied Krishna confidently.

And so Krishna armed with a flute, began to accompany the other cowherds every day. Once out in the fields, he would sit under a tree and try playing the flute. At first it made all sorts of funny noises but gradually as the days passed, Krishna learned to play it softly.

In the afternoon, whilst his companions rested under the shade of trees and the cattle too dozed, chewing the cud,

the soft and sweet strains from Krishna's flute often made the cowherds sit up in wonder. What a charming music! The cows stood up and the birds stopped twittering to listen. Even the leaves, seemed to have ceased to rustle. Everyone and everything seemed to listen to Krishna playing his flute.

As the days passed, the music became sweeter and sweeter. It seemed to have magic. Whenever Krishna put the flute against his lips, there was complete peace and quiet about him.

A few years passed thus, Krishna was now a bright young boy. Yashoda was proud of him. He took good care of the cattle and they seemed to love him most of all. He was popular with the village maids too. They all left their work and ran down to the grazing grounds whenever Krishna played on his flute. The mischievous Krishna noticed this. He had plans for them.

Spring came and with it came, Holi, the gay festival of colours.

"Let's collect some buckets and fill these with water," said Krishna to his friends. The boys as obedient now as they had been when they were five year olds, did as they were told. Before the crack of dawn, buckets in hand, they herded the cattle to the grazing grounds. Krishna assembled all the buckets, then taking out packets of coloured powder he stirred these in water.

"Now hide these buckets behind the trees and go back

to your cattle. But be alert and await my signal and then do what I do."

The boys dispersed and went about tending their cattle like any other day. Never had a group of cowherds looked more innocent but their eyes were alert. They wondered what Krishna was up to.

For a couple of hours nothing happened. Then Krishna, resting against a tree, began to play his flute. The sweet strains seemed to be carried by the wind to the village. In a few moments he spotted Radha along with her friends, clad in new clothes, coming towards the field. Krishna continued to play, his eyes half shut. The girls were now very near. He stopped abruptly and called to his friends. In a moment the air was full of coloured water and the surprised shrieks of the girls as they ran helter skelter. Krishna caught the fleeing Radha and poured a whole bucket of coloured water over her. He burst out laughing as she, blinded, gasped for breath.

It was a day of merry making so the boys left their cattle and wandered into the forest. It was a crisp spring morning. A soft and gentle breeze rustled through the leaves.

"Come boys, lets pluck those fruits," said Krishna pointing to a tree. "Let's see who can pluck the first fruit."

"Wait, don't go there," cautioned one of the boys.

"Those trees belong to a fierce animal with the face of a donkey."

Krishna laughed at this.

"Don't laugh, Krishna," his friend said, "that animal tears up anyone who touches his fruits."

"We'll deal with it when it comes. I'm hungry now and am going to eat those fruits. If you are afraid, you can stay behind. Here I go."

All the boys followed Krishna. Once on the trees they plucked the fruits as fast as they could. They were not sure whether there really was such an animal that guarded the tree but to be on the safer side they wanted to be off as soon as possible. They were paralysed with fear when they suddenly heard the thumping of hoofs. The sound became louder and louder and then they sighted the dreadful animal. It was a massive one and it had the head of a donkey which was so large that it was frightening. It stopped at a distance, snorted and stamped his hoofs in anger.

Pawing the ground angrily, it charged at the boys on the first tree. The boys were terrified but Krishna and his elder brother Balaram, swiftly climbed down and got ready to face the attack. Their friends wanted to warn them but the warning stuck in their throats. As the animal head downwards came at them, the brothers swiftly stepped aside with the result that the animal crashed into the solid trunk of the tree, horns, head and all. It fell down with a thud,

stunned. Krishna and Balaram wasted no time. They lifted it by its hind legs and dashed it to the ground and that was the end of the animal. The cowherds with a yelp of joy, clamoured down the trees and placing the brothers on their shoulders they triumphantly returned to the village.

Soon after this, one sunny day, the cattle, whilst grazing wandered off their usual path. It was noon and the cowherds were thirsty. Krishna climbed up a tree to see if he could spot any water nearby. He saw a lake and urged his friends to hurry towards it. The boys ran ahead whilst Krishna climbed down the tree and followed them. When he reached the lake, he found all of them dead. 'What could have happened !' he wondered. 'Who could have killed them ?'

Krishna looked around and then walked to the edge of the lake. He was thirsty and was tempted to drink, but first he wanted to know who or what had killed his friends. Suddenly a large snake heaved its hood out of the water. Krishna now knew that it was this snake that had poisoned the waters which had killed his friends. He would kill it, he decided even if he died in the process. No one could kill his friends without going unpunished. Krishna spotted a tree which had one of its branches overhanging the lake. He climbed this and then jumped on the hood of the snake. It is said that the hood was so large that Krishna began to dance on it and as he seemed to become heavier and heavier,

the snake tried by various means to throw off Krishna but it was no use. Its hood began to sink into the water and it felt it could not bear the boy's weight any longer. It cried out, "Krishna, please get off my hood. I promise I will never again poison the water of any lake."

"That is not enough," replied Krishna. "First suck up all the poison that there is in this lake and then get out."

The snake hastily sucked up every drop of poison, and as soon as Krishna jumped off its hood, it heaved itself out of the lake and disappeared with amazing speed.

Krishna returned to the bank of the lake to find Yashoda in tears. She had come out in search of her son, and had witnessed Krishna's dance on the snake's hood. She was numb with fear. When Krishna with his mischievous smile stood before her and took her tearful face in his hands, she clasped him to her and wept in relief. Then Krishna went to his friends. They had turned blue. He gently passed his hands over each one of them and they sat up, rubbing their eyes.

Death of Kans

One day Narad came to Kans's Court. Narad was a wandering saint, who always meddled in people's affairs and caused troubles.

"Kans, why did you kill all those new born sons of Devaki ?" he asked. "It was a foolish thing."

"What do you mean ?"

"What I mean is simple. The eighth son of Devaki is now a fine strong lad."

"Is ?" Kans asked unbelievingly.

"Yes, is. He lives with Nand in Brindavan."

Kans was shocked. He had so cleverly planned the boy's death and now Narad was telling him that the boy was alive. This meant that he would have to plan the boy's death all over again. He wasted no time. He sent his spies to Brindavan.

"Find out all you can about Nand's son," he said to them.

The spies soon returned and reported. "Nand is a very powerful leader of cowherds."

"And the son ?"

"Krishna and Balaram, his brother, are loved by all the people not only in Brindavan but here in Mathura too."

Kans did not like this.

"Tell me more about Krishna," he said.

"They say that Krishna is the reincarnation of the lord Vishnu. The people believe this. He is very handsome and both the brothers are noted wrestlers."

Kans's face lit up. He called one of his most trusted men

and said, "Go to the house of Nand in Brindavan. Invite his sons Balaram and Krishna to the wrestling match that I am organising here. Tell them that wrestlers from other kingdoms are coming to participate in it. This of course is not true," he added with a cunning smile. "When they come I will let loose my largest and wildest elephant on them. If they escape that then they will have to face my best wrestlers. Death is what awaits them here."

The messenger rode off to Brindavan. When he came to Nanda's house and saw the two handsome lads his heart filled with pity. He called them aside and said, "I have come from Kans, the King of Mathura. He has invited you to a wrestling match, but do not go, my boys. He means to kill you. He will never let you get away alive."

Krishna was at first upset but then he shook his curly head and said, "I will go. Balaram, what about you ?"

"I will go too," pat came the reply.

"That settles it then," smiled Krishna, "go back and tell Kans that we accept his invitation."

The messenger looked unhappy. "Going there is like going to meet your death. You don't know Kans and his evil mind."

"Please don't worry about us. Nothing will happen to us."

"Don't tell me that I did not warn you," replied the messenger before he rode away.

When the cowherds heard of Kans's invitation and his actual intentions, they excitedly crowded around Krishna and begged him, "Let us go with you just in case you need our help." Krishna smiled at their imploring faces and said, "All right, we shall all go to Mathura."

It was a merry group of cowherds that left Brindavan the next day. They found Mathura in a holiday mood. People from the neighbouring villages and kingdoms had come to witness the wrestling matches. The news that Kans had invited two cowherds to the match had spread around. The people discussed and debated the reason behind the invitation. "Why? Why?" they all asked but no one knew the answer.

On the day of the wrestling match there was great excitement. Even before the sun's rays touched the sky, people started assembling in the arena in front of the palace. By and by Kans, with his courtiers took their places in the balcony of the palace. It was announced that the first item of the day was a wrestling match between Krishna, Balaram and two of the most dreaded wrestlers of the time —Chanura and Mustaka.

Krishna had just entered the arena when lo and behold! a huge wild elephant was let loose. It came charging at him. Some of the spectators screamed at the sight, others where so shocked that they seemed to have lost their voice. Krishna, a lone, slight figure stood calm and undaunted. As

the animal, head flung downwards, came charging into him. Krishna with amazing speed jumped on to its neck. Then entwining his arms around the massive neck of the animal, squeezed it with such force that it fell down dead. Immediately a shout of joy went up from the crowd.

Kans, seated on the royal dias amidst cushions of velvet and silk gnashed his teeth in rage. Then a sly smile lit up his evil face. Chanura and Mustaka had entered the arena. They were like huge apes. The crowd watched in disbelief. On the one hand there were the famous animal-like wrestlers and on the other Balaram and Krishna, mere lads, young and handsome. Krishna and Balaram watched the approaching wrestlers, their body tense but the smile never leaving their faces. Chanura with a snarl made a dash for Krishna.

"I'll crush you like an insect," he shouted as he made a grab at Krishna. But he had miscalculated the boy's speed. Krishna swung around and sprang on Chanura. The wrestler snarled like a mad animal and tried to shake Krishna off his back. But Krishna, his hands around Chanura's throat pressed with all his might and Chanura, gasping for breath, fell to the ground. Krishna did not let go till Chanura had gasped out his life. Mustaka met the same fate at the hands of Balaram.

The crowd went wild with joy, but Kans was furious at

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his men. "Arrest those boys and kill them. Kill Vasudev and Devaki, too."

His men were too shocked at the order to execute it Kans, his face flushed in rage, shouted, "What are you all standing there for ? Go and do as I say, kill those two boys and then go and kill Vasudev and Devaki."

As he uttered those last words, Krishna jumped up on the royal dias. Kans's eyes grew big with fear, but before he could cry for help, Krishna caught him by the hair and said, "So, you want to kill your sister too ? You are not satisfied with the blood of so many on your hands ? Your time has come. Get ready to meet Yama."

With these words, Krishna smashed the head of the stupefied Kans on the wall.

"Kans is dead, Kans is dead !" The cries of the people rent the air and they danced about, drunk with joy. The cowherds, proud of their Krishna, lifted him on their shoulders and danced about too. But Krishna had work to attend to. He jumped down and went to the prison cell where Vasudev and Devaki were held prisoners. He threw open the doors. His parents wept with joy. They had sent him away as an infant. He had now come back to them as their saviour.

Krishna also freed the aged father of Kans and placed him on the throne. Mathura now settled down to a peaceful and happy life.

The Hermitage

Krishna did not return to Brindavan. Vasudev sent his son, to the *ashram* of Sandipani, to study the *Vedas* and to learn the use of weapons. Krishna bid farewell to Nand and Yashoda, and his tearful companions with whom he had spent many happy years. It was with a heavy heart that he left them behind.

Sandipani was considered to be one of the greatest sages and the best teacher of that time. He had a large but simple hermitage. Here princes as well as the sons of poor brahmins came to study. He treated them all alike and they all had to lead the hard life he set for them. In the *ashram*, Krishna did all sorts of work. He swept and cleaned the rooms, chopped wood and gathered wild fruits from the forest. Quiet and smiling, he attended to his work with great devotion. In the class he listened attentively to the wise words of his teacher. Sandipani was very pleased with this disciple of his.

One day, a poor brahmin boy joined the *ashram*. His name was Sudama, a quiet and humble boy. Krishna took an instant liking to him. The two boys became very friendly

and, as the days went by, they began to love each other as brothers.

One day as they were chopping wood, Sudama said, "Krishna, we will go our way as soon as we finish our studies here. Will you remember me then ? Me, a poor brahmin boy whilst you will become a king and live in a palace ?"

"What a thing to say Sudama !" said Krishna." How does poverty or riches affect the love between two friends ? I shall always love you just as much as I love you now."

Sudama smiled sadly in reply. He did not believe that Krishna would even remember his name after leaving the *ashram*.

"Krishna, let us rest a little, whilst you tell me of your adventures at Mathura and Brindavan. I love to hear about them."

To please his friend, Krishna rested his axe against a tree and sat down. As he narrated his tales, he remembered his friends at Brindavan. How good they had been ! They had loved to hear him play his flute. Krishna took out the flute and, he put it to his lips. Sweet music filled the air, but the strains were sad. Tears filled Krishna's eyes. He quickly put away the flute.

Sudama asked, "Krishna, why did you play such a sad tune ?"

Krishna rose. "Let us hurry to the *ashram*," he said, "or we may be late for our class."

The friends piled the wood on their shoulders and returned to the hermitage. They were surprised to hear excited voices coming from within. Sandipani came out and called, "Krishna, some men are here to meet you."

A group of men had come from Mathura. They seemed to be deeply worried. "Krishna," they said, "we are in

great danger. Jarasandha, Kans's powerful son-in-law, is coming to attack Mathura. He says he will punish us for daring to kill Kans. What are we to do ? We will be crushed like ants under the feet of his army. Save us Krishna. You alone can help us!"

Dwarka

Krishna returned to Mathura. He found the people panic-stricken. They feared Jarasandha, one of the most powerful kings of the time. Krishna called a meeting of the elders of the city and said, "Even if we keep on fighting for a hundred years, we will not be able to defeat him. We will not meet him in the battlefield to be killed like flies. Instead, we will build a wall around the city in order to keep him and his men out."

Men set to work immediately and, soon, massive walls rose up all around the city. The defence being strong, Mathura was now ready to face the enemy. Jarasandha had been busy building up a large army. He marched towards Mathura leading thousands of men, horses and elephants raising clouds of dust. The noise made by the tramping of feet, the neighing of horses, and the trumpeting of elephants was deafening. The mighty army, however, had to halt outside the gates of Mathura. The city was so well guarded that it was not easy to enter. Jarasandha ordered his men to pitch their camps outside the city walls.

Months went by without any result. His men were becoming restless. One day news reached Jarasandha that two

of his dearest friends had died. Jarasandha was broken-hearted. He ordered his men to lift the siege and return to their own country.

The people of Mathura were glad to see the army retreat. But alas ! their happiness was short-lived. A few months later news came that Jarasandha was coming again with an even larger army. He was determined to take revenge. Mathura, it seemed, was doomed. Nothing could save it now.

Krishna was greatly worried. The elders came to him for advice, but he said, "Give me some time to think." For

the next few days he locked himself in his room, as he pondered over the danger that threatened Mathura. The people looked at the locked door and wondered, 'What has happened to Krishna ? Why does he not come out and say something ?'

To their great relief, Krishna at last emerged from his room. He once again called a meeting of the elders and said, "We cannot fight Jarasandha. That will mean sure death not only for our entire army but also for the people

of Mathura. There is only one way to save ourselves and our families, and that is to abandon Mathura. Let us go westward, away from the reach of Jarasandha. When we find a good safe place, we will build a city for ourselves."

The plan was welcomed, for it was the only way in which the people could be saved. Word was passed around the city, and the men hastened to pack up their belongings. It was a sight to behold ! Rows and rows of loaded carts lined the roads and lanes, as the men hurried to and fro, vacating their houses and packing their carts.

The drums were sounded. It was time to depart. The carts filed out of the city. The men stopped to look back once more at the city which they had grown to love. They went, they knew not where, but they trusted Krishna and so they asked no questions. Miles and miles of carts wended their way through the night. Months passed by as the weary travellers plodded, ever westward. Rain and storm, illness and death raged, but they did not give up. On and on they followed Krishna. At last they came to the sea-shore on the western coast of the country. Krishna said, "Here we shall rest and build a city for ourselves."

The men set to work with great enthusiasm. The months of weariness and fear were forgotten as, brick by brick, they began to build their city. Soon a beautiful city started coming up. It was named Dwarka. Palaces were built for Balaram, Krishna and for the father of Kans. The people of Mathura settled down to a new way of life with a sigh of relief.

Shortly after this, Krishna married Rukmini, the beautiful princess of Vidarbha. Dwarka wore a festive look as it hurriedly adorned itself to welcome the bride.

Sudama

Krishna often wondered about his boyhood friends. One of them, Sudama, after leaving the *ashram*, had become a teacher. He was a poor man. He got married and a daughter was born to him. He loved this little girl dearly and he used to feel very sad when he saw her in torn clothes or when she sobbed herself to sleep because there wasn't enough food for her. Sudama was a sad man indeed.

One day, his wife, unable to bear up with so much poverty, said to him, "You often speak of the friendship between you and Krishna. If you two were really such great friends then why don't you go and ask him to help us. Everyone says he's a very generous man."

Sudama was shocked.

"Go to a friend for money?" he asked. "Are you mad ?"

"What is wrong in it ? How can you bear to see our little girl in rags and hungry. At least for her sake you should go."

"But supposing Krishna does not recognise me or does not remember me ?"

"That's a chance you will have to take," his wife replied.

"But how can I go empty handed ?"

"Then take something for him."

"What can I take for him ? He is the king of Dwarka. What can I give him ?"

His wife's face lit up as she said, "I have a bag of puffed rice. Take that. Krishna loved puffed rice when he was in the *ashram*, didn't he ?"

"Yes he did."

"Then that settles it."

And so Sudama with a small bag of puffed rice set off for Dwarka.

One day, as Krishna and Rukmini sat playing a game of chess, a guard entered the room and bowed low. "Lord," he said, "a ragged brahmin is at the door. He looks very tired and ill. We have tried to send him away, but he keeps repeating, 'Tell Krishna that Sudama has come'."

Krishna sprang up, "What did you say ?" he asked, shaking the guard by his shoulders. "Did you say Sudama? Where is he ? Where is he ?"

Krishna did not wait for a reply. He ran out of the room. He ran through the big palace rooms and along the lengthy corridors crying, "Sudama, Sudama, where are you ?"

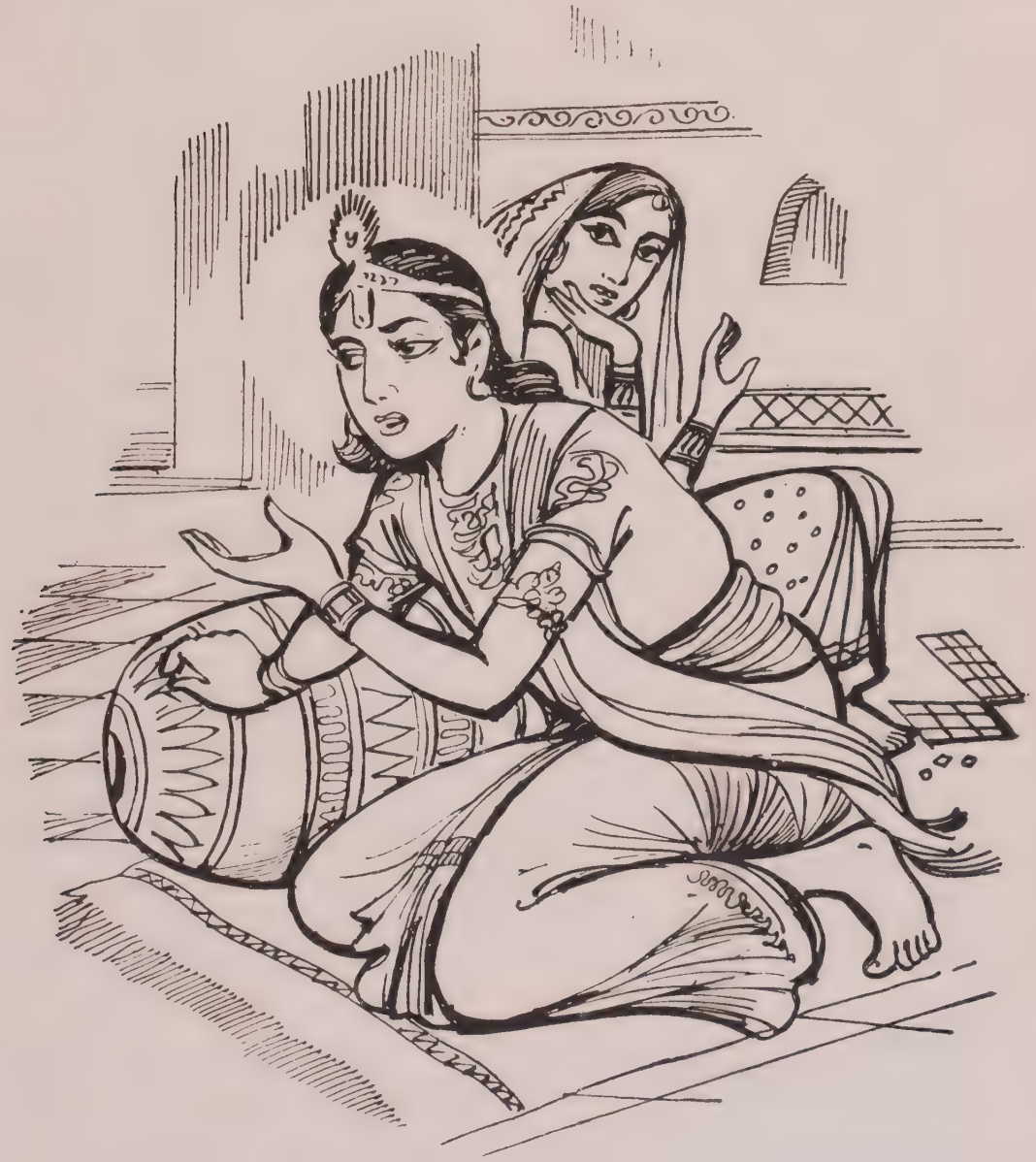
At the palace door-steps he saw him, his dear friend

Sudama, lying unconscious. He looked so weary and thin as though he had not eaten for many a day. His clothes were dusty and torn. Tears welled up in Krishna's eyes as he lifted Sudama and carried him into the palace. The guards ran forward to help him but he turned them aside. "How poor and starved my friend is !" cried the heart of Krishna.

He laid him on a bed and, taking a bowl of water, washed Sudama's dusty and blistered feet. Rukmini sat by, fanning. Gradually Sudama opened his eyes and gave a faint smile when he saw Krishna. Food was served and Sudama ate eagerly. It was after many days that he was tasting any food at all. He wondered about his wife and children. Had they anything at all to eat that day ?

Sudama remembered the small bag of puffed rice tucked away at his waist. He tried to hide it. How could he give such a humble present to a king ? But Krishna had

seen the bag and he snatched it away. "Let me see what you have brought for me. Ah, wonderful !" he exclaimed.



"I love puffed rice," he said laughing as he took handfuls of the rice and ate it with relish.

"Sudama, why did you not come before this to meet me ? I have often thought about you."

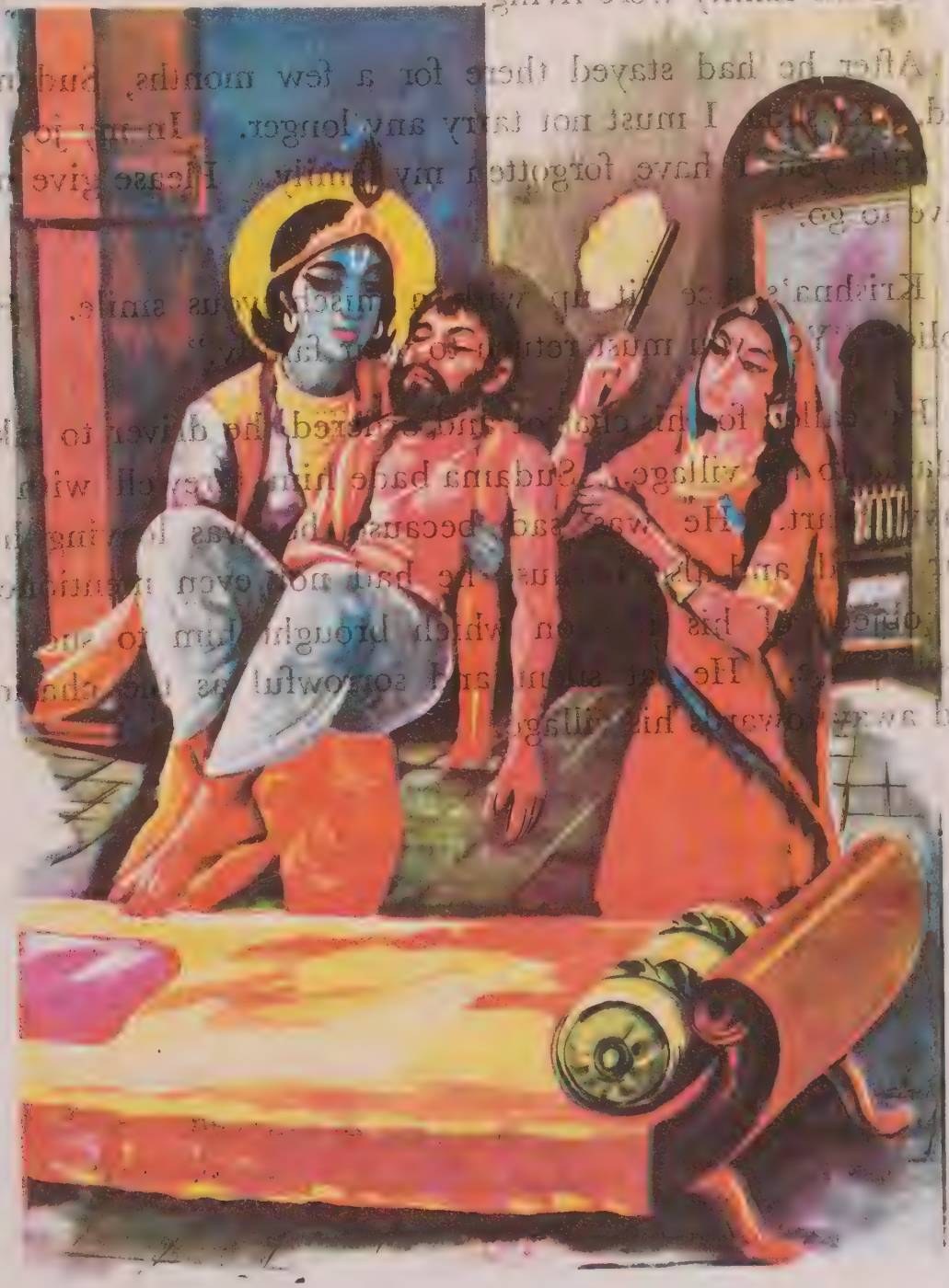
"I, too, have missed you, Krishna. I have heard of your great adventures. You have led a busy life since we parted."

And so the two friends sat and talked, oblivious of the world and its time. It was well past midnight when Krishna said, "Go to bed now, Sudama. You must stay with me for some time. I will then tell you all about my adventures. By the way, in which village do you live ?"

Sudama gave the name of his village hoping that Krishna would ask him something about his family. He could then tell him about why he had come to Dwarka. But Krishna just smiled and went away.

Krishna called his best workers and said to them, "Go to Sudama's village and build a beautiful palace for him and his family. Stock it well with money, grains and clothes. See that nothing is ever wanting there." The men sped away in the darkness of the night to do the bidding of their master.

The next few weeks just seemed to slip by as the friends spent their time in each other's company. They had met after a long time and there was so much to tell. Every morning Sudama wished to ask Krishna to help him and his family, but when Krishna came, the words just seemed to



get stuck in his throat. Not once did Krishna inquire how he and his family were living.

After he had stayed there for a few months, Sudama said, "Krishna, I must not tarry any longer. In my joy to be with you I have forgotten my family. Please give me leave to go."

Krishna's face lit up with a mischievous smile. He replied, "Yes, you must return to your family."

He called for his chariot and ordered the driver to take Sudama to his village. Sudama bade him farewell with a heavy heart. He was sad because he was leaving his dear friend, and also because he had not even mentioned the object of his mission which brought him to such a far-off place. He sat silent and sorrowful as the chariot sped away towards his village.

Pandavs

Krishna sat in the glittering court of King Drupad. He had come to witness the swayamvara of princess Draupadi. The swayamvara was a ceremony in which the princess chose her husband from amongst her suitors by garlanding him.

Draupadi was very beautiful and kings and princes from many lands had come to attend the swayamvara. They sat on jewelled chairs whilst Drupad sat on his golden throne. Draupadi sat beside him, garland in hand. The common folk sat at the other end of the hall.

Drupad rose and announced, "The man who wants to marry my daughter will have to hit the eye of that fish revolving on the ceiling by looking at its reflection in the pond below. Everyone will be given only one chance."

The words caused great excitement. People watched with great interest as the test began. One after another, the suitors went to try their luck but not a single man was successful. The crowd wondered. Would this mean that their beautiful princess would remain unwed ?

After all the kings and princes had returned frustrated to their seats, King Drupad then invited the common folk to try their hand.

"I give my royal word that the man who succeeds will marry my daughter," he said.

At first the crowd was surprised at the announcement. When they realised that King Drupad had really invited them there were excited murmurs all around. They looked at one another. Who could go? They wondered. Grumbling could be heard from the royal suitors at Drupad's announcement. "It's foolish," they all said but did not interfere because they were sure no one of the common folk could succeed where they, illustrious archers, had failed.

After a few moments, a young man stood up. He was strikingly handsome, tall and muscular. He was dressed as a brahmin but when he walked to the centre of the hall, he walked like a prince.

Krishna watched with a smile and whispered to Balaram. "That dress cannot fool me. He is none other than Arjun, the Panday Prince."

The brahmin took the bow and looking intently at the reflection of the fish in the water, released his arrow. Unerringly it flew up and struck the eye of the fish. A

shout of joy went up from the common enclosure, but the royal suitors rose to a man, swords drawn.

"A poor brahmin cannot be allowed to marry a princess," they cried.

A fight started. Four tall muscular men were seen to join the brahmin and they fought by his side. One of them dragged in a tree from somewhere and brought it crashing down on the heads of the opponents.

"That's Bheem to be sure," said Krishna. "Only he can think of such things." Then, raising his voice, he shouted, "Stop the fight !"

The hands of the fighting men faltered and there was a pause in the fight.

Krishna said, "The brahmin has justly won the princess. If you are angry at all, you should be angry with Drupad. He laid down the condition. Go to him."

The kings and princes, embarrassed, sheathed their swords and walked out of the hall. Krishna's guess had been correct. The brahmin was none other than Arjun. Arjun was not only his cousin but his friend too.

The Pandav princes were very happy to see Krishna.

"Come with us. Mother Kunti will be happy."

Krishna went along with them. Kunti welcomed him to her humble hut.

"Why are you all dressed up as brahmins ?" Krishna asked.

"Duryodhan, our wicked cousin turned us out. He even tried to kill us by setting fire to our house. We escaped through a tunnel. Ever since then we have been moving about in this guise to escape notice. I am sure Duryodhan's spies are everywhere looking for us."

"Now that we have king Drupad on our side," said Bheem proudly, "we shall demand our share of the kingdom."

"Krishna, will you go to Hastinapur and discuss with Duryodhan ? He may listen to you. We only want our share of the kingdom. That is all," said Yudhisthir.

Krishna went to Hastinapur. At first Duryodhan flatly refused to give anything to the Pandavs. He was fuming with rage because Arjun had won Draupadi. Duryodhan too had attended the swayamvara but had failed to hit the eye of the fish. To think that Arjun had succeeded where he had failed ! He could not bear the thought.

There were long discussions among the elders. They finally persuaded Duryodhan to accept division of the kingdom. Duryodhan refused to listen to it but when he heard of the part that was to go to his cousins, he agreed. The most fertile and beautiful part of the kingdom had

come to him whilst his cousins, had received only barren land where nothing grew and where no one lived.

"What an unjust division!" fumed Bheem, when Krishna conveyed the message.

"Don't worry, Bheem," Krishna said, "I promise that I'll help you build a city beautiful enough for the gods."

And that was exactly what he did. He sent men, material and money and little by little a beautiful city began to take shape. Finally, it was so beautiful that they named it Indraprastha, the city equal to the city of Indra, the king of gods.

The Chief Guest

Yudhisthir was crowned the King of Indraprastha. He was a kind and just man, and his fame spread far and wide. People flocked to his capital and the kingdom prospered. Krishna spent much of his time here, guiding Yudhisthir in the affairs of the State. The brothers turned to him for advice on all important matters.

One day, as he sat in the court with the brothers, one of the ministers said to Yudhisthir, "Sir, I speak with the approval of the ministers and of the people of the kingdom. You are now a wealthy and powerful king. We request you to perform the *Rajsuya Yagna*."

The *Rajsuya Yagna* was a sacrificial ceremony which would give him the title of an emperor.

Krishna did not approve of this. He said, "This ceremony can be performed only if all the kings of the country agree to accept Yudhisthir as their emperor. All the other kings may agree but Jarasandha will never do so. He is a proud and powerful man. To get out of his reach, we had to flee to Dwarka. You must first kill him if you are to perform the ceremony. You cannot defeat him on

the battlefield. He must be challenged to a duel and killed."

"I cannot allow such a thing," said Yudhisthir. "Jarasandha is a great warrior and will surely kill the man who fights him."

"Have no fear," said Krishna. "Jarasandha has sinned much and his end is near. Allow Bheem and Arjun to go with me to his capital. We will challenge him to fight one of us."

So Krishna, Bheem and Arjun left Indraprastha dressed as brahmins. They entered the capital of the kingdom of Jarasandha unnoticed and slipped into the palace by scaling the high walls that enclosed it. They tiptoed along the palace corridor. It was evening and the lamps had not yet been lit. Just enough light streaked in through the tall windows to help the three men to see where they walked. Then, just where the corridor turned sharply to the right, they dashed into a man. The man was none other than Jarasandha himself.

"Who are you ?" he asked angrily. "How did you enter the palace ?"

Jarasandha looked at them up and down and sneered, "You cannot deceive me by your dress. You are not brahmins. The scars on your bodies tell me that you are warriors. Tell me at once who you are. Why have you come here in this guise ?"

Krishna stepped forward. Jarasandha went back a step. He had recognised him.

Krishna said, "You have recognised me, it seems. These two are the Pandav princes, Bheem and Arjun. We are here to challenge you to a duel. Choose one of us to fight you."

"Arjun is but a lad and you," Jarasandha added scornfully, "are but a cowherd. I have nothing to do with you. I will fight Bheem."

The fight began. For fourteen days and nights it went on without a pause. At last Jarasandha showed signs of fatigue. Bheem took advantage of this. He caught hold of him by his leg and tore him into two.

Krishna released all the kings whom Jarasandha had imprisoned. They had been rescued from the very jaws of death, for Jarasandha had planned to offer them as sacrifices. They were all very grateful and happy. They returned to their kingdoms, vowing to acknowledge Yudhisthir as emperor.

Krishna put Jarasandha's son on the throne, and together with Bheem and Arjun, returned triumphantly to Indraprastha. A date for performing the *Yagna* was fixed, and invitations were issued to all the kings and princes to attend the ceremony.

The capital was gaily decorated to receive the royal

guests coming to attend the ceremony. Colourful flags and flowers hung from every house and rose-petals covered the broad roads. Palaces were erected to house the guests.

The long awaited day arrived and the ceremony began. Kings, princes, warriors and sages from all over the country were assembled there. Duryodhan, with his brothers, was also present. Amidst the singing of hymns and the recitation from the sacred texts, Yudhisthir was crowned emperor. Now came the time to welcome and honour each guest. But according to custom, the chief guest had first to be chosen. Whom were the Pandavs to choose ? To choose one would be to dishonour the others. After much thought their choice fell on Krishna. He was to them an incarnation of God, a friend and guide.

Some of the guests grew angry at the choice. How dare the Pandavs give the place of honour to a cowherd when kings and sages were present ! Sisupal, the king of Chanderi, raised his voice in anger. He abused Krishna and the Pandavs. He cried, "Krishna, stand up and fight like a man. Let us see who is worthier of the seat."

Sisupal rose, sword in hand. Krishna took his *chakra* or discus and rotating it at a high speed, flung it at Sisupal. The *chakra* flew through the air, sliced off the head of Sisupal and returned to Krishna.

Silence reigned in the hall. The ceremony was completed without further interruption. Yudhisthir was now an

emperor and there were great festivities all over the land. After the celebrations, Krishna took leave of the brothers and returned to Dwarka.

Krishna Helps Draupadi

Krishna had been in Dwarka but a few weeks, when news reached him that the Pandavs had been exiled to the forest. The story went that Duryodhan had challenged Yudhisthir to a game of dice. The stakes were that the loser would stay in the forest for thirteen years, after which his kingdom would be returned to him. The game had been played and Yudhisthir had lost. He had been banished to the forest with his brothers and Draupadi.

Krishna was very unhappy at the news and drove away in his chariot to seek them out. He arrived at their hut in a dense forest one late afternoon. The brothers were nowhere to be seen. Inside the hut, he found Draupadi in tears. As soon as she saw him she ran to him crying, "O Krishna, help me. The great sage, Durvasa, has come here with thousands of his disciples. They have gone to the river to bathe. I am to serve them food when they return. From where am I to get so much food ? The magic vessel of the Sun-god, which gives us food twice a day, is now empty and will fill only in the evening. If I do not serve food to Durvasa and his men, he is sure to get angry and curse us.

"Krishna, tell me, what shall I do? I was praying to you just now and you have come. Please help me."

Krishna was amused at her distress. He smiled and said, "Draupadi, get me the magic vessel."

"But it is empty. I have just now washed it."

"All the same, get it for me."

Draupadi ran into the hut to get the magic vessel. She

was wondering what Krishna would do with it. She was sure that it would not fill now. But she also knew that Krishna possessed divine powers and that he would not let her down. So she brought the vessel to him.

Krishna took it from her and scanned the inside. He found a grain of rice sticking to one side. He scraped this out, put it into his mouth and made a sign to show that he was satisfied, as though he had a full meal. Durvasa and his men had bathed and were getting ready to come to the hut when they suddenly felt as full as one feels after a heavy meal. They at once knew that it was Krishna's doing. He had given them this feeling. Durvasa sent word to Draupadi, "Please excuse us. We do not need any food as we are not hungry." The sage left the forest with his followers.

The brothers were happy to see Krishna again. Arjun said to him, "Krishna, tell us why we should waste thirteen years in the forest. Duryodhan deprived us of our kingdom by deceit. Is it not right that we should declare war on him and get back by force what belongs to us ? We know that we can do it, but Yudhisthir does not listen to us. Try to persuade him. Perhaps he will listen to you."

"Yes, Krishna," added Bheem. "Is it not foolish to waste so many years here ? We must declare war immediately."

Krishna nodded his head. He said, "It is no use trying

to persuade Yudhisthir to declare war. He will not do it. He has promised to spend thirteen years in the forest and he will spend full thirteen years there. Who has ever heard of Yudhisthir going back on his word ? Bear with him and in due time you will be victorious."

Bheem and Arjun glumly accepted Krishna's words and agreed that they would try to pass the years of exile with forbearance.

At Hastinapur

Krishna returned to Dwarka. It was now a prosperous city. The people too were happy and content. They had forgotten Mathura and those days of living in fear of their lives. Krishna attended to every want of the people and no man was sent away empty-handed from his door. Day and night they sang his praises. He was to them a friend and their spiritual guide.

At the end of the thirteenth year of the Pandavs' exile, Krishna once again paid them a visit. He found Yudhisthir sad and Bheem and Arjun in great temper.

"What is the matter ?" he asked.

Bheem, his eyes red with anger, replied, "Duryodhan has refused to return our kingdom to us as agreed. We should have declared war long ago but no one paid any heed to my words. What are we to do now ?"

"Have patience, Bheem !" said Yudhisthir. "War is not a good thing and we should avoid it at all costs. Krishna, please go to Hastinapur and persuade Duryodhan to return our kingdom to us. It is a promise he had made to us when he banished us."

Krishna set off for Hastinapur. He knew that a war between the cousins would be disastrous. It had to be avoided at all costs.

Krishna was given a royal welcome at Hastinapur. Duryodhan came to meet him, and he brought rare presents for Krishna, hoping to win him over to his side.

"I cannot accept these presents now," said Krishna. "I have come with an offer of peace from your cousins. We will discuss that first."

The words made Duryodhan angry. He called his friend Karna and said, "Do you know that Krishna refused all my presents ? We must teach him a lesson. Who cares about his talks for peace. Let us capture him and put him in prison. This will scare our cousins and they will give up all thoughts of war."

Krishna entered the royal court of Hastinapur. It was full of people. They had assembled to hear the message he carried. He said to Duryodhan, "Your cousins want you to keep the promise you had made to them thirteen years ago. Return their kingdom to them. They ask for nothing more."

"I refuse to return even an inch of their kingdom," Duryodhan replied haughtily.

"How can you say that !" exclaimed the elders at the court in one voice. "The Pandavs have made a just demand. Give them back their kingdom. You, a prince of this great house, should not break a promise."

"I do not care about promises," Duryodhan said. "If my cousins really want their kingdom, let them fight for it. I have the backing of powerful kings. Not even God can defeat me."

These words made Krishna angry. He said, "Duryodhan, not only you are an unjust man but you are also wicked. You have plotted to capture and imprison me. You don't know who I am that you have dared to think of such a mean thing ?"

A dazzling light surrounded Krishna and he revealed his divine self to the court. The men fell at his feet in adoration, all except Duryodhan. He strode out of the hall.

Krishna took leave of the elders and drove away. He was sad because he had failed in his mission. A war between the cousins was now inevitable.

The Great Battle

Brisk preparations for the war began on both sides. Kings from all over the country came to the rival camps offering help. To Krishna, this war between the cousins was not a good thing. He decided not to fight in it. He returned to Dwarka.

Duryodhan and Arjun both set out for Dwarka to seek Krishna's help. It so happened they arrived there on the same day. When they went up to the palace to see Krishna they found him asleep. Duryodhan walked in proudly. He saw a throne placed at the head of Krishna's bed. He sat down on it. Arjun knelt down on the floor near Krishna's feet. The cousins waited for him to awake.

When Krishna awoke, he was surprised to see Arjun kneeling at his feet. Then he heard a voice and turning around, he saw Duryodhan on the throne.

"What are you two doing here ?" he asked.

Duryodhan spoke first. He said, "Krishna, I have come to seek your help in the war to be fought. I came first and so you must show me preference."

Krishna smiled and answered, "You may have come first but I saw Arjun first. To be fair to both I will make two offers. One can have me but only as a charioteer. I have decided not to take up arms in this war. The other can have my entire army to fight on his side."

Without a moment's hesitation, Duryodhan chose the army. 'Ofwhat use would Krishna be to him as a charioteer?' he thought. Thanking Krishna for his generous help, Duryodhan returned to Hastinapur.

Arjun was happy to have Krishna on his side. To the Pandavs, Krishna was an incarnation of God and to have

him on their side even as a charioteer would ensure victory.

The day of the battle dawned and the rival armies ranged themselves on opposite sides near the village of Kurukshetra. The golden chariot of Arjun blazed in the morning sun. His four white horses pranced as Krishna firmly held the reins.

Arjun said, "Krishna, drive my chariot into the middle of the field. I wish to see the army of my cousins."

Krishna steered the chariot forward. When Arjun saw his kinsmen arrayed on the other side his heart was filled with grief. "I will not fight this war," he said. "How can I kill them ? Of what use is kingdom and wealth if it has to be won by killing one's near and dear ones ? I will retire into the forest and live as a hermit for the rest of my life."

"What do you mean ?" said Krishna greatly shocked and surprised. "Are you not a *kshatriya* and is it not the duty of a *kshatriya* to fight for truth and justice ? Duryodhan is a wicked person. He has broken a sacred promise and deserves to be punished. Do you wish to run away from the battlefield at this late hour and thus help the victory of evil over good." Then Krishna spoke to Arjun about God, man and his soul. He said, "The body perishes but the soul is immortal. All those who die fighting on the battlefield go to heaven and live forever. There should, therefore, be no room for sorrow over the death of your near and dear ones."

Arjun was deeply impressed by these wise words. He said, "Krishna, lead me on. I will fight."

The battle began. It was a fierce one from the start. When the armies met with a deafening clash of armour and weapons, men fell in thousands. Sharp arrows hit Krishna. He paid no heed to them as he drove the chariot through the enemy ranks. Blood flowed freely from his wounds.

Only when he could pause to free one hand from the reins, did he pluck out the arrows.

Arjun was a great warrior and he fought admirably but whenever he faced a kinsman, the hand on his bow faltered. Krishna noticed this a number of times. He became angry. He left the chariot and picked up a wheel to crush an enemy.

Arjun jumped down and ran after him crying, "Come back Krishna, come back. Do not break your vow. I promise I shall fight with all my might."

Krishna threw down the wheel and returned to the chariot. From then on he had no complaint. An unending line of arrows seemed to flow from Arjun's bow and the enemy retreated in fear.

Krishna and Arjun

One day, after the day's heavy fighting, Krishna and Arjun returned to their camp. There was an uneasy silence everywhere. The four Pandav brothers were in tears. What did it mean ?

Arjun shook the weeping Yudhisthir and asked, "Brother, why do you all weep ? What is the matter ?

Where is my son Abhimanyu ? Why do I not see him anywhere ?"

Yudhisthir cried out, "Arjun, your darling son is dead. We tried to follow him into the enemy ranks but our way was blocked by Jayadrath and his men. We could not save Abhimanyu."

Arjun's heart seemed to burst. His dear son was no more ; Abhimanyu, the bravest warrior in the field, though but a lad of sixteen years. Arjun's grief was great but his anger was greater. He said, "I vow that I will kill Jayadrath before the sun sets tomorrow or else I will end my life."

The Pandavs looked at one another uneasily. Killing Jayadrath before sunset was an impossible task. Duryodhan was sure to keep him at the tail end of the army and Arjun would have to fight right through the entire enemy ranks to reach him. Grief, it seemed, had robbed Arjun of his sense.

To their amazement, Krishna clapped Arjun's shoulder and said, "Well said, Arjun. Tomorrow is bound to be a memorable day."

Duryodhan and his men were greatly excited to hear of Arjun's vow. "The son has been killed. Now the father will follow," they said joyfully.

The next morning, Jayadrath was kept right at the end of the field guarded by a big ring of warriors. The rest of the huge army stood ready and poised to bar Arjun's progress. The best warriors of the side faced Arjun. So sharp were their arrows that Arjun had to use his best to counter their attack. Under the hail of arrows, Krishna too was seen lost in thought. He seemed to be planning something.

The day was half spent and Arjun had not been able to fight his way even to the middle of the field. Krishna said, "The horses are tired and thirsty. Get down and fight. I will rest the horses."

Krishna unyoked the horses and to the surprise of the enemy he created a small lake edged by Arjun's arrows. Having refreshed and rested the horses, he once more yoked them to the chariot.

The sun was slowly sinking down the horizon. Arjun urged Krishna to drive faster. He was feeling greatly worried. Just as he reached Jayadrath, a cry went up from Duryodhan, "Jayadrath is saved. The sun has set." But even as he cried, Krishna whispered urgently to Arjun, "Kill Jayadrath. The sun has not set. I have hidden it behind a cloud."

Arjun raised his bow just as the sun peeped out from behind the cloud, and shot Jayadrath. A cry of despair

rang through the enemy ranks. Arjun had avenged himself and fulfilled his vow. Jayadrath was dead.

After this, one by one, the men of Duryodhan fell, all but his friend Karna. He alone seemed invincible. He went through the Pandav ranks mowing down the men with his sword as though they were tender plants. The men dreaded his very presence. He killed wherever he went.

One day he came face to face with Arjun and challenged him. When these two warriors met, fighting stopped in many places as the men paused to watch. As the two fought the wheel of Karna's chariot sank into the mud. He jumped down and tried to lift it out but was unable even to move it.

Arjun raised his bow to shoot. At this Karna cried out, "Arjun, wait, do not shoot. Let me free the wheel and then I will fight. It is not just to kill a man when he is defenceless."

At these words Krishna said, "How dare you speak of justice ! Where was justice when you helped Duryodhan to set fire to the house of his cousins ? Where was justice when they were exiled for thirteen years ? Where was justice when you persuaded Duryodhan not to return their kingdom? Where was justice when you and your friends killed Abhimanyu ? Arjun raise your bow and kill Karna."

A powerful arrow from Arjun's bow struck Karna and he fell dead on the ground.

Yudhisthir is Crowned

Duryodhan was killed by Bheem and the battle came to an end. The Pandavs heaved a sigh of relief. It was a bloody war in which the best warriors of the country had been slain. The battlefield of Kurukshetra was red and sticky with blood. The brothers retreated to the camp of Duryodhan to pass the night there. Such was the custom.

That very night when everything was dark and still, a commander of Duryodhan entered the Pandav camp and set fire to the camp in which the sons of the brothers slept. The boys were burnt alive. The Pandavs were inconsolable. Yudhisthir said, "I will retire to the forest. I do not want a kingdom which has been bought at the price of death."

"It is not proper for you to speak thus," said Krishna. "It is true that the best blood of the country has been shed but it was for a just cause. Your duty now is towards the people of the kingdom. Return to Hastinapur and take the reins of the kingdom in your hands."

'How right Krishna was,' thought the sorrowing

Yudhisthir. 'A king had no time to waste on grief. His first duty was towards his subjects. What would he and his brothers have done,' he wondered, 'without Krishna's constant help and wise counsel. Krishna had always helped them to follow the path of righteousness.'

After a month of mourning on the banks of the Ganges, the brothers took the road to Hastinapur. It was gaily decorated and brightly lighted. Cries of 'Long live the King,' rent the air as Yudhisthir drove through the streets in his golden chariot.

Incense and sweet scent of flowers filled the air in the palace. Amidst the singing of hymns and the chanting of the sacred texts, Yudhisthir was led to the throne of his ancestors. Krishna put the crown on his head and applied the *raj tilak* or red mark on his forehead.

About this time a son was born to the wife of Abhimanyu, the son of Arjun. Abhimanyu was dead. The other sons of the Pandavs, too, were dead. The Pandavs had hoped that the son of Abhimanyu would rule after them, but to their great sorrow the child was born dead. There was a great deal of weeping and wailing as the news spread through the palace. The ladies of the palace fell at Krishna's feet crying, "Lord, save this child. He is our only hope."

Krishna took the child in his arms. The skin looked so blue and cold. Krishna passed his fingers over the still body. For a while nothing happened. The spectators stood silent and still. A hush fell over the palace. Suddenly the child blinked its eyes, wriggled its tiny legs and then gave out a loud cry. Krishna's divine fingers had given it life. He heaved a sigh of relief and returned the child to the ladies.

Hastinapur was joyous and festivities marked the great event. After these were over, Krishna took leave of his cousins and returned to Dwarka.

The Death of Krishna

Krishna reached Dwarka after a long journey. He was sad at what he found there. Dwarka had lost its peace. The

men who had taken rival sides in the war, now fought and quarrelled amongst themselves, whenever they met. Then one day, whilst they were drunk, their talking turned to taunts and soon taunts turned into blows. Swords flashed angrily in the noonday sun and before long the market-place was strewn with dead bodies.

The ghastly sight made Krishna sad. To ease his mind he went away to walk in the forest. For a long time he roamed among the trees feeling restless and sad. Dwarka had lost its charm and he did not feel like returning to it. A bushy plant with pale pink flowers caught his eye. It looked beautiful and inviting. Krishna cleared the ground and lay down under the tree. The flowers hung so low that they nearly touched his face. He fell asleep.

It was evening and the sun reddened the sky as it dipped down the horizon. A hush fell over the forest. Dusk had descended. A hunter came that way. In the fading light he saw something under a flowery bush. To him it appeared to be a deer. The hunter was delighted. The whole day had passed by without a single kill. Now at last he had spotted an animal. He quickly took out his bow and released a poison-tipped arrow. Through the evening light it sped and pierced the right foot of the sleeping Krishna. He awoke with a start. The poison flowed into his blood and pain was intense.

The hunter walked leisurely to collect his kill. He was filled with horror when he saw that he had killed not a deer but Krishna, his king and his god. He fell sobbing at Krishna's feet. "I shall end my life at your feet," he sobbed as he took out his sword.

"Stop," said Krishna. "Why do you wish to take your life ? We must all die one day. How we are to die is determined by God above. Why then blame yourself for an act that you did unknowingly ?"

Krishna could speak no further. His eyes dimmed and his faltering hands sought the support of the hunter. Suddenly the hands dropped and the head fell forward. Krishna was dead.

Basu

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